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ABSTRACT

A performance-based reading methods course at Michigan State University arose from the differences between traditional and performance-based preservice methods courses. Differences between the two types of courses are found in their objectives, clarity of communication, grading, unit of instruction, type of learning activity, type of pacing, provision for failure, assessment and evaluation, role of student, and role of instructor. The objectives of the Michigan State course specify the desired terminal behaviors, assess the student performance of each behavior, stress activity-centered responses, emphasize the application of methodology, and focus on individual progress. Evaluation of the program focuses on the characteristics of the performance-based course and data from questionnaires completed by the students. (Recommendations are made to stimulate further exploration into the implementation of performance-based methods courses.) (BRB)

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Developing a Performance-Based Reading Methods Course

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Pre-service teacher training in reading has long been the object of concern. Austin and Morrison (1) pointed to the paucity of specific reading methods courses in the early 1960's while a more recent study (3) maintains that students still view themselves as unprepared to teach reading a decade later. A course developed at Michigan State University attempts to alleviate this situation by using a performance-based strategy for teaching reading methods.

WHAT IS PERFORMANCE-BASED INSTRUCTION?

Performance-based courses differ from other methods courses primarily in the objectives and criteria for evaluation. While a traditional methods course may state general goals and evaluate student performance with tests covering lecture material, a performance-based course explicitely states the competencies needed to assume a specified teaching role and evaluates the student's _bility to actually perform these tasks. This difference and others are specified in the following chart:

	Traditional methods courses	Performance-based courses
1. Objectives	Broad, general goals subject to many interpretations.	Precise, sequencial behavioral objectives which specify the criteria for determining that the student has mastered each performance.
2. Clarity of Communication	Students are not always certain of what they should be able to do at the close of the course and must "psych-out" the professor to be assured a good grade.	Both the students and the instructor are clear regarding what is to be mastered and how mastery will be determined.

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	Traditional methods courses	Performance-based courses
3. Grading	Grades are awarded in terms of how the student's test scores relate to the normal curve; some students pass, some fail, and some become certified teachers even though they can satisfactorily perform only 70% of the tasks required by the instructor.	Each individual must master each objective in the course; the student receives a grade of "Pass" when he has successfully performed all the tasks.
4. Unit of Instruction	Chapters in the testbook, lecture sessions, or units.	Modular, with each module specifying (a) a performance or group of related performances, (b) a tool for assessing entering behavior, (c) a series of instructional activities designed to provide the student with the knowledge to perform the task, and (d) a tool for assessing terminal behavior.
5. Type of Learning Activity	Passive listening to a lecturer and note taking; little performance or application required.	Variety of activities, all of which require overt responses; students must apply knowledge in a manner consistent with the performance specified in the objective.
6. Type of Pacing	Instructor-paced; each student matches the instructor's pace in moving through course topics.	Self-paced; each student takes as long as he needs to attain each objective.
7. Provision for failure	Students who fail a test must compensate on subsequent tests to obtain an average score high enough to pass; little or no provision is made for clarifying misunderstandings on the first test.	Alternate routes for achieving each objective are provided; students who perform a task incorrectly the first time are re-cycled for additional instruction until they can demonstrate mastery.
8. Assessment and evaluation	Assessment is normally confined to administration of examinations at mid-term and end-of-term for purposes of assigning a final grade.	Assessment is utilized at frequent intervals to provide both diagnostic information regarding instructional needs and student feedback regarding quality of performance.

	Traditional methods courses	Performance-based courses
9. Role of the Student	Student is often unsure of the behavior expected of him, unclear regarding his responsibilities, and threatened by the instructor's power to arbitrarily award a failing grade.	Student knows that he is responsible for demonstrating the specified performances and that he need not fear failure if he persists.
10. Role of the Instructor	Is a dispenser of theoretical knowledge; occasionally offers practical "tricks of the trade" but seldom requires student application of instructional techniques.	Is an enabler of learning who integrates theory with practice by planning activities requiring the actual performance of the tasks specified.

In short, a performance-based course precisely specifies the desired terminal behaviors, assesses in terms of student performance of each behavior, stresses activity-centered responses, emphasizes application of methodology, and focuses on individual progress.

A DESCRIPTION OF THE M.S.U. COURSE

The reading methods course developed at Michigan State University during 1970-71 incorporates the above characteristics. The heart of the new course is the behavioral objectives specifying the desired terminal performances. A consumable workbook helps develop these objectives by presenting simulated problems which students solve by applying the principles of reading instruction. Students may go to class and respond to the semi-programmed workbook activities at the instructor's pace of they may complete the activities at their own pace.

The procedure can be illustrated with a typical module. The sample objective is:

> Given two pupils reading graded oral reading paragraphs, the student identifies the instructional, independent, and frustration reading level of each pupil.

Either by attending class if he has chosen instructor-pacing or by listening to a previously-prepared tape-recording if he has chosen self-pacing, the student receives input regarding the need for diagnosis, the types of diagnosis, the characteristics of informal assessment, the criteria for determining the various levels, and examples of oral reading performances. He listens to the oral reading of the two pupils, noting each pupil's performance on the paragraphs, analyzing this performance, and categorizing the reading level of each. The instructor provides guidance and feedback both during and following the activity. Students check their responses, asking questions to clarify any misunderstanding as they do so. Those pacing themselves follow the same procedure except that they turn off the tape recording as they respond and turn it back on again to receive the correct answers. Terminal behavior is assessed by giving a similar task at a later date. Failure to perform successfully at this time results in re-cycling for additional instruction and completion of alternate assessment forms until such time as mastery is demonstrated.

A unique feature of the course not usually associated with performance-based strategies is one designed to combat the danger that heavy reliance on behavioral objectives may lead to narrowness and rigidity. A series of workshops, offering flexibility both in terms of alternative teaching methods and student choice of learning activities, are scheduled weekly with students given the option of attending any of these or none at all depending upon their interests and career aspirations.

ASSESSING THE COURSE

Two approaches were taken in assessing the program. An analysis was made of the degree to which the course epitomizes the traits of performance-based instruction and evaluative data were collected from students.

Characteristics of Performance-Based Courses. When examined in terms of the ten characteristics of performance-based instruction, the M.S.U. model clearly meets the criteria in six instances. First, the objectives are behavioral and

specify the criteria for evaluation. Second, the students and instructor communicate clearly regarding course content and how mastery is to be determined. Third, the simulated problems in the consumable workbook require active responses and application of knowledge. Fourth, assessment is frequent and is used both for diagnostic purposes and to provide feedback to students. Fifth, the student is responsible for his own learning and knows he will succeed if he expends the necessary effort. Sixth, the instructor's role is one of planning learning activities in which the student solves practical problems similar to those he is likely to meet in his own classroom.

The M.S.U. model approaches, but has not yet fully achieved, the four remaining characteristics of grading, modular organization, pacing, and provision for failure. First, because of current university policy, a "Pass-Fail" grade system is not yet used. However, all students must achieve all objectives. Failure to do so results in an incomplete grade. Second, a modular approach is being developed, but the tools for assessing entering behavior are not yet available for each objective. The conversion to a completely modular approach is being made as the modules become available. Third, a student can pace himself through the course but, once he has selected the self-paced route, he must stay on it. When the modules are fully developed, students will be able to self-pace on some modules and instructor-pace on others, depending upon their desires and needs. Finally, students complete alternate activities for each objective not mastered the first time but, because the course is still in the early stages of development, the number of alternate forms is limited. Again, however, abundant alternates are becoming available as the modules are developed and refined.

As can be seen, the course is characteristically performance-based in its objectives, clarity, types of activity, assessment, and the respective roles of students and instructor. The continued development of the grading system, modules, pacing, and alternate routes assure that the course will epitomize all ten characteristics during the second year of its operation.

Data Collected from Students. A pre- and post- achievement test, a self-confidence questionnaire, and an open-ended questionnaire have been used to determine the effectiveness of the new course.

A twenty item achievement test, administered at the first and last session of the course, resulted in a pre-test mean of 8.32 and ~~the~~ a post-test mean ~~was~~ of 15.09, indicating an average growth of 6.77. The pre-test range was 1-14, while the post-test range was 2-20, with 79% of the post-test scores being higher than the highest score on the pre-test.

The self-confidence questionnaire listed, in performance terms, the objectives of the course, with students being asked to respond to each in terms of "Yes, I can," "I am not sure," or "No, I cannot." On this instrument, 80.7% indicated that they were confident of their ability to perform each of the objectives at the end of the course.

While many questions were posed on the open-ended questionnaire, student response to the question, "Did you learn in this course?" is typical. Of the 248 responses, 239 responded "yes," 9 said they were not sure, and none responded "no." Further, 56% of the respondents emphasized their affirmative response by underlining, adding exclamation points, and so on, while 39% stated that it was "the best course I have ever had" or "the best education course I've ever had." Such unsolicited endorsements indicate considerable student enthusiasm for performance-based instruction.

These data, collected from large lecture classes during the exploratory stages of experimentation with the strategy, reflect the potential effectiveness of performance-based instruction. Even more encouraging results can be expected as experience is gained with the strategy and as instruction moves to small classes in 1971-72.

A VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Performance-based methods instruction is feasible, both pedagogically and economically. Consequently, M.S.U. continues to develop its reading methods course.

The ultimate goal is the creation of a completely individualized clinical, performance-based course. The objectives will specify actual field performances for each task, as opposed to the present simulated performances. Grading will be on a "Pass-deferred" basis, with no time limits imposed. Each student's entering behavior will be assessed for each module, he will receive instruction appropriate for him, and he will move through the tasks at his own pace. A variety of instructional options for achieving each objective will be available, with the student choosing the one most appropriate for him. All options will require overt responses on the student's part, consistent with the concept of performance-based instruction. Terminal behavior will be assessed for each module, alternate routes will be provided for mastering any objectives not completed successfully the first time, and no limits will be placed on the length of time a student can take to satisfactorily complete the course. Computers will be utilized to keep track of the individual progress of numerous students. The optional workshops, offering the flexibility of enriched preparation and specialization beyond the minimal performances, will conintue to be developed and expanded.

SOME CAUTIONS

While performance-based reading courses offer great potential for improving teacher preparation, empediments to implementing such courses do exist. Some of the major problems to be resolved are:

1. Adjusting the performance-based concept to a timed-based university system. Ideally, a student in a performance-based program should be able to work on any misunderstood task until he has mastered it. However, the time pressure of the traditional terms is restrictive since students feel they should complete the course in the usual time and since instructors are relunctant to assign incomplete grades when those students must then be taught the following term along with the normal enrollment.

2. Managing a performance-based program. In a true performance-based course, each student moves at the instructor's pace only until he is re-cycled to complete an alternate form of a misunderstood task. Theoretically, at the end of a term one might find more students in the re-cycled tracks than in the instructor's track. The formidable management task associated with such individual progress poses a substantial problem.

3. Adjusting a performance-based program to the traditional university grading system. The goal of a performance-based program is mastery for all. There is no such thing as "better mastery" or "worse mastery." There is only mastery. Consequently, the only viable grading system is "pass-deferred." How to implement this philosophy within the framework of an "A-B-C-D-F" grading tradition is, however, another unresolved problem.

4. Developing appropriate clinical experiences. While simulated situations or the traditional supervised field experiences are useful, the real test of the effectiveness of any methods course is the teacher's performance when alone in his own classroom following graduation. Developing the means for achieving this view of performance is still another unresolved problem.

5. Economical support for a performance-based curriculum. Attention to individual needs always demands a strong support system. It is unclear whether universities, in a time of severe financial difficulty, are committed enough to the individual to provide such support.

CONCLUSION

Experience with a performance-based reading methods course at M.S.U. indicates that it is effective in training pre-service teachers. However, much remains to be done before the strategy's maximum potential for improving teacher education can be realized. Perhaps the program and experience described here will stimulate the additional exploration needed to fully assess this approach to methods instruction.

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